



Zwingli & the Zurich Reformation

The Reformation, that great movement of the sixteenth century, out of which Protestantism was born, can be viewed from different standpoints. It has been looked at in Church History largely as a polemical movement — as a tremendous controversy in doctrine and religious life between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. We will look upon it as an evangelistic and missionary movement, and this will give a new perspective to it. For evangelization played a prominent part in the work of the Reformers. They did personal hand-to-hand work; and they also either went themselves or sent missionaries into regions as yet unevangelized by Protestantism.

Birth and education

Ulrich Zwingli, the founder of the Reformed Churches, was born in northeastern Switzerland, at the village of Wildhaus, in the canton of St. Gall, which is located in a high valley about 4,000 feet above sea-level. The low Swiss chalet, in which he was born, January 1, 1434, is there today, black with age. Zwingli's father, the magistrate of the district, saw he was too bright to be a shepherd boy, and at the age of eight sent him away to school. His education was guided by his uncle, his father's brother, who was priest at Wesen, about fifteen miles south of Wildhaus. There was a providence in this, for his uncle was inclined to the new learning of that day, called humanism. Its more liberal spirit reacted against the narrow scholasticism of the Catholic Church and thus prepared the way for the Reformation. It was the liberalizing influence of this uncle that prepared Zwingli to later become the Reformer.

After studying in his uncle's school for two years, he was sent to school at Little Basle (opposite Basle, on the east side of the Rhine), where he began to reveal remarkable ability in his studies, especially in debate and music. About three years later he was sent to the school at Berne, which was noted for its humanism, and he remained there until sixteen years of age.

His stay there was cut short by the following incident. He would later become the most musical of all the Reformers, playing seven instruments. The Dominican monks at Berne, seeing his ability and remarkable love for music, tried to get him to join their Order. Had he done so, he would have become a monk-reformer, as was Luther. But providence wanted the Reformation in Switzerland to be different from that of Luther — to be begun by a priest-reformer, and by one who was, especially, a scholar in the new learning, humanism. Zwingli had gone so far toward joining the Dominicans as to live in their monastery. But then came the command of his father, perhaps at the instigation of his liberal-minded uncle, calling him home, so that he might be saved from monkhood. He was then sent to the university of Vienna, where he remained for two years, giving attention especially to philosophical studies, though there were humanistic influences there.

Crisis in his education

Zwingli progressed rapidly in his education. In 1502 he returned to Basle to teach, and also to study in the university. Here, fortunately, he attended the lectures of a Professor Thomas Wyttenbach. Wyttenbach had been born at Biel, a town west of Berne, and, after lecturing at Basle to Zwingli, he some years later went back to his birthplace to become its Protestant Reformer. Just as Ananias (who brought Paul out of the darkness of soul at Damascus), is forgotten in the greater glory of his convert, so Wyttenbach is forgotten in the greater glory of his pupil, Zwingli. Zwingli always spoke of him as "*the most learned and holiest of men,*" and in his letters calls him "*his dear preceptor.*" This reveals the debt that he felt he owed to his teacher.

Wyttenbach planted in his mind three seed-thoughts, that afterward came to harvest and produced the Reformation. Luther became a Reformer by emphasizing the doctrine of justification by faith, but Zwingli approached the Reformation from a somewhat different viewpoint, namely (and these were the three seed-thoughts that Wyttenbach taught him):

1. The supreme authority of Scripture — the Bible was to be the guide rather than the Church, as the Catholics held.
2. Sins are forgiven through the death of Christ, and not through the Virgin Mary, as Catholics held.
3. The sale of indulgences was a fraud and a cheat.

Zwingli was under Wyttenbach but a few months, but in that short time Wyttenbach left an indelible impression upon him. These three seed-thoughts slumbered in his mind for about ten years, and then, as we shall see, they came to harvest as he began the Reformation at Einsiedeln. How wonderful and eternally-lasting is the influence of a Christian teacher. All the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches, now numbering about thirty millions of adherents, have come directly out of this Reformed Reformation, and are the result of these three seed-thoughts of Wyttenbach. Indeed, all the other Protestant Churches, except the Lutheran, have indirectly come out of it, so that Wyttenbach's influence through Zwingli is affecting more than one hundred millions who are living today. What an inspiration, this, to the Christian worker. It is one of the most remarkable illustrations in all Church history.

We now come to the study of Zwingli's conversion. The study of a man's conversion, especially of a great man like Zwingli, is a very interesting subject, and we may well pause to follow its steps carefully.

First Charge: Glarus (1506)

In 1506 Zwingli was called as priest by the congregation at Glarus, situated about fifty miles southeast of Zurich. He remained there for ten years. The church in which he preached was burned down by a conflagration in 1561, which destroyed most of the town. And the new church is a simultaneous church that is, one in which both Catholics and Reformed worship, though at different hours. The communion cup used by Zwingli is still there.

The most interesting question about this period is whether there were any signs of his becoming a Reformer. It is very evident that as yet he was only a humanist; and yet in his case, as in that of a number of others, humanism was the bridge over which he passed to Protestantism. He revealed his love of humanism during this period in several ways:

1. He began the study of the Greek language about 1513. The Latin language was the sacred language to the Catholics, so the study of the Greek prepared him to become a Reformer when he later gained possession of the Greek New Testament.
2. He started a school which was attended by young men of the best families and in which he taught, the new humanistic methods of education. Some of his students, who afterward became prominent, as Tschudi, bore witness to his wonderful power as a teacher.
3. He came into correspondence with Erasmus, the leader of the humanists.

But the Protestant was beginning to appear in the midst of the humanist, though still faintly. There are several signs that prophesied the coming Reformer. These were:

1. A *linguistic* preparation (the knowledge of the Greek), which prepared him to later read the New Testament and thus see the difference between it and the Romish Church.
2. A *political* preparation. He paid three visits to Italy as chaplain to the Swiss troops hired by foreign powers. These visits to Italy opened his eyes to the great wickedness of the papacy, for the proverb then was "the nearer Rome, the worse Christian."

3. A *liturgical* preparation. While in Italy, he found at Milan that the old liturgy of Ambrose, the early Church Father, differed from the Romish liturgy of his day. A second discovery that he made was at Mollis, a village just north of Glarus, of a liturgy of two hundred years before his time, which said that at communion the cup was given to the laity, whereas the Catholics in his day gave only the bread to them.
4. A *doctrinal* preparation. He began to doubt the doctrine of the intercession of the saints, one of the fundamental doctrines of Romanism.

Second charge: Einsiedeln (1516)

In 1516 he left Glarus for Einsiedeln. The cause of his departure was the opposition of a minority in his congregation because he was so outspoken against the foreign military service of the Swiss. We thus see that he was a political reformer even before he became a religious one. Einsiedeln was a very different field from Glarus. It was a pilgrimage-place in an upper valley four thousand feet above sea-level, and about twenty-five miles northeast of Zurich. Here Zwingli was not priest, as there was no parish. But he was preacher for the pilgrims who came from Switzerland and southern Germany. The name Einsiedeln means hermit, and hither Meinrad, the hermit, had come in the ninth century and founded a monastery.

It had in it one of the most sacred of the Romish relics, the image of the Black Virgin, which was believed to have power to forgive sins. There was a providence in his appointment to this place, for, as he had no pastoral duties, it gave him ample time for study. Like Paul in Arabia, and Luther at the Wartburg, he was set aside in quietness so as to be prepared for his great work as Reformer. It was here that he began preaching the Gospel of Protestantism, for he said, "*I began to preach the gospel of Christ in 1516, before any one in my locality had as much as heard of Luther.*"

The event that made Zwingli do this was the publication of a book. Oh, how great is the power of a book, especially when that book is the Bible. In 1516 Erasmus published the Greek New Testament. As Zwingli read it, a flood of light burst on his mind, as he saw how different the Romish Church was from the New Testament. He copied in his own handwriting all the Epistles of Paul in Greek, and committed whole Epistles to memory. This later proved of great value to him in his disputations with the Catholics. In thus committing Scripture, he is an example to be imitated by Christians today.

And now the seed-thoughts planted in his mind by Wyttenbach sprang forth to harvest, and he began the Reformation. His progress seems to have been gradual, but at that time he seems to have been farther advanced than Luther when the latter nailed the theses on the church door at Wittenberg, October 31, 1517. For he was already emphasizing the central doctrine of Protestantism, that sins were forgiven through the ransom of Christ. Zwingli had gone deeper than Luther, for he believed in the ransom of Christ, which is the root and basis of justification. He was, too, a hero of great moral courage in preaching this doctrine, for over the door of his abbey were the words, "*Here sins are forgiven by the Virgin Mary,*" and within was the Black Virgin worshiped by the pilgrims. And yet he boldly preached that sins were forgiven by Christ, not by Mary. His preaching was revolutionary, for some of the pilgrims carried away these new doctrines with them. Thus they were scattered far and wide, and he gained great fame for his boldness and eloquence.

First year at Zurich (1519)

Zwingli's fame as a preacher became so great that the little mountain abbey could not hold him. In the latter part of 1518 he was called to be the head priest at the cathedral of Zurich. He went to Zurich as a missionary to tell them the new Gospel he had learned from the Word of God and to preach to them about the ransom of Christ, for they were in the darkness of Romanism. Zurich was at that time a walled city of perhaps 10,000 inhabitants, the chief city in northeastern Switzerland. Here on New Year's Day, 1519, he startled his congregation by announcing that he would preach to them on the Gospel of Matthew, verse by verse. In doing this he was making prominent one of his cardinal principles, namely, the supremacy of Scripture. But this was a very different kind of

preaching from that to which they had been accustomed, which consisted of saint stories, etc. It created great excitement, but many found in it the spiritual food for which they had long been yearning.

He also showed his missionary spirit by trying to convert the country people as well as the city folk, for he began preaching on Fridays as well as on Sundays, as Friday was market day and that brought the people of the canton to Zurich. The result was this new Gospel was spread through all the canton of Zurich as well as the city. Soon after he came to Zurich, Samson came there selling indulgences, but Zwingli preached so hard against him that Samson left not only Zurich, but Switzerland. But the labors of the young priest proved greater than his strength. He, in order to recuperate, went to a neighboring watering place, Ragatz-Pfaffers, about seventy miles southeast of Zurich, where in a picturesque narrow gorge were healing springs. Then the plague broke out in Zurich, and, like a faithful pastor, he came back to Zurich to minister to his flock. He soon fell a victim to the plague, and was so sick that it was reported that he was dead. But God preserved him for great purposes. However, this severe illness greatly deepened his religious experience. This is shown by the hymn that he composed during this sickness, which consisted of three beautiful short prayers in verse. He was now, both by study and religious experience, prepared for the great work that was about to come upon him, namely, the Reformation of the city of Zurich.

Beginning of the Zurich Reformation (1520)

Zwingli's preaching soon began to exert great influence in Zurich. Already at the beginning of 1520 he had over 2,000 adherents. In 1520 the city council ordered that all preaching must be according to the Word of God. In 1522 matters began to come to a crisis. As a result of Zwingli's preaching, Christopher Froschauer, the great printer of Zurich, refused to fast in Lent. Zwingli defended this position about fasts. The Bishop of Constance, in whose diocese Zurich was, complained to the councils of Zurich against Zwingli. The Reformation was in great danger. Zwingli betook himself to prayer, and, lo, on April 9 the great council of the city decided against the bishop. Then the bishop had a decree passed at the Swiss Diet against Zurich. But Zurich went on, nevertheless, in her reforms.

On July 17 Zwingli did what may be called personal missionary work for the conversion of Lambert of Avignon. Lambert was a Franciscan monk, with whom Zwingli debated publicly about the intercession of the saints, and so powerfully that Lambert was converted to Protestantism.

On November 11, 1522, the Zurich council took an action that virtually was the beginning of a declaration of independence from the power of the Bishop of Constance, and so from the Catholic Church. It was when Zwingli brought matters to an issue by resigning, because certain of his duties were against his Protestant views. The council accepted his resignation, but, *without asking permission of the bishop*, requested him to continue to preach. It also went farther and forbade the foreign service of the Swiss, and also refused to give up to the bishop the Evangelical pastors at Zurich.

It was very evident that matters were approaching a crisis. This crisis came in 1523. On January 29 there was a great disputation held at Zurich. Zwingli had, ten days before, just as Luther had done at Wittenberg in 1517, nailed up 67 theses for debate. These were much more Protestant than Luther's were, though it is to be remembered that Luther's were five years earlier. Zwingli defended his theses out of the Bible, and gained a great victory, as the council ordered that nothing be preached but what was founded on the Word of God. A second great conference was held on October 26, 1523, before a large audience. A voice or two were feebly lifted up to defend Catholicism, but Zwingli and Leo Juda literally annihilated their opponents out of the Bible as they discussed images and the mass. As a result of this conference, Zurich committed herself more fully than ever to Protestantism.

Zwingli, in November, 1523, preached against images. Thomas Platter tells the story that he was at that time sexton in the Fraumünster Church, Zurich. One morning when Zwingli was to preach in the church, Platter found he had no wood for making a fire to heat the church. He looked into the church and saw no one there, so he took a wooden statue of John from the nearest altar, and as

he threw it into the stove he said, "Little John, now stoop, for you must go into the stove." When it began to burn it produced a very ugly odor, due to the paint on it. So he closed the stove door. The schoolmaster, Myconius, came in and asked, "Have you had good wood?" and Platter thought that John had done his best. As the congregation began to sing the hymn, two of the priests, who had come in, began quarreling about the missing statue, the one calling the other a Lutheran and charging him with having stolen his John. These facts never were made public until many years later when Platter was at Basle. The next year (1524) the images were taken out of the churches, and in December of that year the monasteries were suppressed.

Completion of the Zurich Reformation (1525)

By the end of 1524 the only remnant of Catholicism was the mass. Finally, in the spring of 1525, the Zurich council ordered that on Thursday of Passion Week, April 13, the Lord's Supper should be celebrated in the Protestant fashion, by using bread instead of wafers, and by giving the cup to the laity in addition to the bread. Thus, after six years of struggle, from 1519 to 1525, the Reformation was victorious. Zwingli was its leader, and he was aided by Leo Juda, who had become pastor of St. Peter's Church, Zurich, and by Myconius, the schoolmaster of the Fraumünster Church there.

On July 19, 1525, Zwingli began a new kind of service in the chapel of the cathedral, which was called a "prophesying." It was a sort of conference and prayer-meeting, the forerunner of modern prayer-meetings. In this he was later followed by Haller at Berne, Calvin at Geneva, and à Lasco in London. Zwingli also, in 1525, wrote his most important work, *A Commentary on True and False Religion*. It was a brief system of theology describing the different Protestant doctrines and refuting Catholicism. But all this victory was gained only after great effort and also great danger to Zwingli, for his life was often threatened.

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